The background features a textured, painterly style with green and yellow tones. Several daisies are scattered across the scene, with one large one on the left and many smaller ones at the bottom. A silver fountain pen is positioned diagonally on the right side, pointing towards the top left.

Gay Edelman

The Client as Teacher

Experiences of a Writing Coach

COACHING, LIKE LIFE, IS BOTH AN INSIDE AND OUTSIDE JOB.

We coaches support development of the inner life because that leads to greater joy, sanity and functioning in the client's world.

We support external actions, because all of life is a balance of the inner and outer worlds. We humans, not just coaches, act our way into good thoughts. And we think (feel, heal, meditate, pray, move) our way into good actions.

As the Buddhists say, "Before enlightenment, I chopped wood and carried water. After enlightenment I chopped wood and carried water."

All of this came home to me again recently when I found myself caught up in an extended email exchange with a prospective client in my practice as a writing coach. She came to me with a daunting list of possible writing tasks: Pitch a TV producer! Start a blog! Write a series of how-to books! Send out press releases! Update her website! During our initial free strategy session by phone, we brainstormed and got her focused and inspired. As is my custom, I followed up with an email recapping her new goals and making recommendations for our future work together.

I thought I had been clear. Four rounds of messages later, I realized I was explaining over and over, in a variety of ways, the difference between coaching, editing, writing and all the overlaps and gradations between.

She wasn't getting it, I finally understood, because I was ignorant of the level of her ignorance. And

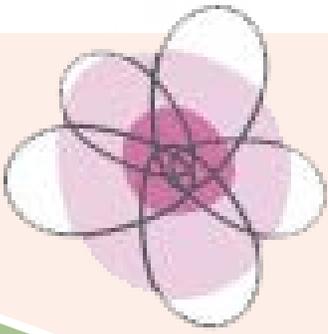
while she was the most insistent on getting the details straight about what was what regarding coaching and editing, she certainly was not the first to grill me this way.

I could see that people needed definitions. So I hunkered down and added a page of definitions to my website.

I emailed her the link. Then I sat back and pondered some more.

I've been a writing coach for nearly three decades. It's a role I embraced when I realized how many people there were who wanted to write, but who had no clue how to get started. And, frankly, I took it up because I was weary of the many people asking to pick my brain or send me manuscripts for review, not quite realizing that writing and editing were my profession and they were asking me to perform professional services for free. At this point, I had been on the editorial staffs of *Good Housekeeping* and *Ladies' Home Journal*, had done a lot of freelance writing for dozens of magazines, and had also ghostwritten and edited some books. So I had most answers at the ready. *I really should charge for this*, I thought after the umpteenth brain picking. I'd never heard of a writing coach, but I decided I'd invent a practice.

When I started this work, my clients were all about creative expression and support of personal growth. My first individual client was a young woman with a learning disability who wanted to write novels. We met in person one-on-one weekly and I explained to her the simple basics. One task, one format. She wrote long hand, and her big tech break-through was transferring her tiny to-the-edges-of-the-paper scrawl onto typewritten pages. She went on to publish several novels.



What Does a Writing Coach Do?

When you're hiring someone to help you with your written work, it's important to know what you're contracting for. Some definitions:

COACHING is when the professional guides the client through the process of creating the written work. My coaching can include one-on-one conversations, email contact and in-manuscript notes for guidance (also called developmental editing; see below). Coaching may include as few as one or two sessions, or ongoing weekly, bi-weekly or monthly contact. Coaching can include building time-management skills, discovering what nurtures creativity, brainstorming ideas, and keeping the client accountable for staying on task. Together the client and coach set goals and establish ways to reach them.

COPYEDITING is the final stage before a written work goes live. The copyeditor fixes any last remaining grammar, punctuation and clarity issues. Typically, the changes are not huge, though they will contribute to the overall quality of the work and the reader's positive response to it.

LINE EDITING is more intense. It happens when the manuscript is basically fine but some sentences may need rearranging for clarity and some content may need to be cut or revised to make the work stronger and more focused. With line editing, grammatical problems are corrected. It overlaps with copyediting, but goes deeper into content and is less intensely focused on every last little technical detail.

REWRITING happens when the ideas are sound but the manuscript is not well organized, the language may be seriously confusing or repetitive, and the author may not have thought everything through fully. Half or more of the content may be deleted and/or replaced.

DEVELOPMENTAL EDITING involves looking at the big picture. The editor goes into the manuscript and offers suggestions for changes, in the form of notes within the manuscript. In most cases the editor will also provide a separate overall report on what the manuscript needs. Typically (and for best results and greatest time efficiency) developmental editing happens early in the writing process. There is little or no line editing or copy editing of the work, since much is likely to change. Typically, my writing coaching will include some developmental editing.

GHOST WRITING is when a writer does writing that is then attributed to someone else. Ghost writers may or may not also be "secret." Ghost writers may do their own research, or the client may provide it, or the client may provide leads and contact information.

WRITING means that the professional writer creates the work from scratch. As with ghost writing, sometimes she will do the research herself, sometimes the client will provide it. The writer's will appear with the work.



And my practice grew. More novelists. Aspiring memoirists.

I also ran two writing groups. One generally supported inspiration, creativity and productivity. The other was for incest survivors, which started after a free workshop I did at a public library. A woman came up to me at the end and asked whether I'd consider doing a single-subject workshop. I would, and did. The groups ran for three years and disbanded only when I had other professional priorities and the groups no longer fit in my schedule (the incest survivors group was a closed, by-invitation-only group and members were required to be in therapy for at least a year).

In both groups, we did a guided imagery and three rounds of freewrites following writing prompts I provided—one to warm us up, another to take

us deeper, and a third to carry us back up again. After each five to ten minute writing session, participants were offered the chance to read to the group and ask for feedback. Their writing, and their personal growth, advanced.

Efficient. Simple.

ENTER, UNIVERSAL SELF-EXPRESSION

But now there are way more possible tasks and those are much more complicated. Also, the writing itself might not be the whole point. The client I currently serve is more likely to be the solo practitioner or small business owner who wants to blog, build out her media platform, flesh out her website, or maybe write a book to self-publish and build a practice as a public speaker.

Clients' needs—and therefore their expectations—are much more diverse, and fueled by rapidly developing information technology. In addition to the long-familiar aspiring novelist, a writing coach has citizen journalists who want to make their mark, aspiring bloggers who can't think of a single subject to write about, and the platform-builders who need to learn how to frame grab-ya messages in 140 characters. There are those who need permission to indulge in the occasional blog that exceeds the 600 word length current conventional wisdom recommends. And those who need to be nudged to update a blog that's gone stale, or drop the blog idea altogether (if you are going to do it, do it well!) And all of us are supposed to be branding ourselves. Images are more important than we've ever been—and in fact now drive the reader's interest more even than words—but we still have find the right words.



Historically, journalistic content has always been a movable feast. Diversity of content and a wide range of different types of outlet were always part of the meal. Writing has always been subject to fads, trends and fashions. Information has always come and gone. This is all still true.

But there used to be plateaus. No more! Now there is no standing still. We are ice skating on a moving ice floe. This is not going to change. And it requires paying closer attention to what our client does and doesn't know. To his context when he comes to us.

The protracted email exchange with the prospective client illustrated how much of what we do is influenced not just by what the client knows she needs, but what she doesn't know she needs. We, as the professionals, have to be sensitive to that and scope it out. We have to constantly up our game.

SOME THINGS DON'T CHANGE

Many of the details of how we practice, and what we do to support our clients and our practice, may be changing at the speed of light. But there are some things that don't.

One is how the work is shaped by the connection between coach and client. A coach friend recently shared how she struggled with knowing when a client was getting off-track during a session. Should she let her client ramble on because she needs to be listened to? Or gently guide her back to the expressed purpose of their work together? My friend and I decided that the answer certainly came down to trusting her own intuition and skills, and possibly to buying supervision to work more

on understand the arc of a counseling session and ways to set boundaries. Coaches and therapists may need to know a broader range of things in a faster-paced world, but the dynamic of learning from the client what he needs is an old one. As is the fact that the best teacher is the best learner.

Another age-old value that's part of the work I do is what I think of as the soul-connection to authentic self (I change up the language depending on what I sense the client is most likely to be receptive to.) When I coach clients to pitch their products or services to prestigious magazines for possible mention, for example, the first thing I look for is awareness, clarity and respect regarding their own mission. If they haven't defined their *raison d'être*, we might need to start there. When I work with a client to build out the content of her website, we first order her professional priorities, starting with who she wants to reach and—most importantly—why.

Where I see the need, I might encourage a client to commit to forms of self-care that will build mental, emotional, spiritual and physical stamina. Good nutrition, enough sleep, time alone and with family and friends—all as vital now as they've ever been.

Related to this, I also encourage many clients to non verbal creative work. The fun part of this is you never know where things are going to end up. I thought I was helping someone write the novel that would help her heal a past abusive relationship. She'd been working the novel for 20 years. She knew there was something off about her inability to birth it. She and I talked about time management. We set writing goals and checked in about them. As with every client, I stayed alert

to issues she might need to explore with a therapist. We strategized and analyzed. We were having fun, but the novel was going nowhere.

Then one day she mentioned that she used to create her own greeting cards. Bingo! I encouraged her to resurrect this non-verbal form of creative expression. Next thing I know, she's branched out to shadow boxes, and is showing her work in a local juried art show. Last I heard, the novel was still gathering dust, but the client was expressing herself full-tilt! The outcome was a good one, just not the one we expected.

Ultimately, of course, the work is the work. Whether we're coaching online, in person, with groups or one-on-one it all comes down to good listening—and good learning on both sides of the desk, phone or computer. 🌱

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gay Edelman is a writing coach who works with individuals and groups to focus and hone their written materials. She has over 25 years' experience editing and writing for mass market. Visit Gay's website: www.coachgay.com

